IS THERE A CHURCH AROUND HERE?

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"Is there a church around here?" I was asked that question on the northwest corner of Michigan Avenue and Superior. I was hurrying to meet my date at a movie theater. (When I arrived, I discovered after waiting in a long ticket line that the movie we had agreed to see was actually playing at another theater, which is where she was waiting for me. But that's another story and not a pretty one). In any event, I was walking purposefully toward my destination, trying to avoid anyone who might slow me down, and in the late

afternoon crowd, waiting for the light on the corner, was a man, appearing to be homeless, asking in a very loud voice, "Isn’t there a (bleeping) church around here somewhere?" The modifying adjective was graphic. No one was paying attention. As city people learn to do, everybody was looking past or through him as his question was called out, even more loudly. It seemed appropriate for me to respond. So I did. I said, "Yes, sir, there’s a church a few blocks north of here, Fourth Presbyterian Church. It’s on the corner across from the Hancock building. You can’t miss it. If you go to the door on Chestnut Street and tell the receptionist that I sent you, she’ll see to it that you get some help." To which he responded impatiently, "I don’t want help. I just

want to pray!" I didn’t have the heart to explain that at this hour the church was probably more prepared to give him a sandwich and a warm coat than a place to pray.

The encounter served as an illustration of a rather complex matter: the relationship of the church to the city and the role of the church in the city in the future.

It’s a very old issue, with its beginnings in antiquity. Historians point out that in the first century, as Christianity spread from its Hebrew Palestinian beginnings along the trade routes of the Roman Empire, the young church quickly became an urban institution. Paul wrote letters to

churches in cities: Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Rome.

The issue is older than that even. In the sixth century B.C., God's people were living in one city and very much missing another city. They were citizens of Jerusalem now living in Babylon in captivity. The Babylonian emperor, Nebuchadnezzar, in order to end once and for all the annoying rebelliousness of the Jews, had defeated their army, leveled their capital city, and drove its citizens across the dessert all the way back to Babylon and put them in a supervised ghetto and kept them there, in captivity for seventy years or so. To say that the exiles were unhappy is an understatement. Psalm 137 gathers up their grief and their anger:

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there
we wept. . . .
How could we sing the Lord's
song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof
of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
[Jerusalem].

They are terribly homesick. And as people separated from home for whatever reason have always done, they withdrew, turned inward, telling stories and singing songs of what used to be in that other city, spent their time pining away for the past or a future in which they would be wonderfully

restored to their homes and families, or finally, waited for God's ultimate deliverance from this world of sadness, grief and suffering, to the next world. What they most certainly were not doing was paying attention to Babylon, the city in which they happened to be living.

Some of the greatest literature of our faith was written in the period of the exile, none more important than that by the prophet Jeremiah, who is back in burned-out Jerusalem writing letters to the exiles in Babylon.

Here's a part of a letter that must have stunned them when they read it:

> **But seek the welfare of the city of where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on**

its behalf; for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

There's a new thought. Stop pining for the past and waiting for your future deliverance—pay attention to the present, the city in which you are living. Pay attention to it. Participate in it. Pray for it. Work to make it a better city. In its welfare is your welfare.

That, it seems to me, is the mission statement for the urban church and for this church in particular. In the city's welfare is your welfare.

The temptation has always been the opposite, to withdraw from the city. In E.L. Doctorow's novel *The City of God*, the author writes a stunning soliloquy on the city: "If you fly above it at night, it is a jeweled wonder of the universe,

floating like a giant liner on the sea of darkness. It is smart, sophisticated, and breathtaking. And it glimmers and sparkles." But then, the problems:"More and more people move into it, the wretched of the earth stream into it. All at once it passes the point of self-containment. Its economy is insufficient,

it becomes less able to employ, house, and feed the crowds that hunker in its streets. Smog thickens, crime increases."

There has always been a cultural antipathy to the city as well as a fascination. Non-city people are sometimes overwhelmed, afraid, annoyed by the busyness, fast pace, crowds, expressway traffic, the sheer complexity of urban life, and can’t wait to leave. Thomas Jefferson much

preferred the serene simplicity of agrarian life—until, that is, he lived in Paris, and then he ran up huge shopping debts that he was never quite able to pay.

In addition to cultural ambiguity about cities as places morally inferior to the countryside, where there are green pastures and lots of space, the Christian faith has always had to resist the temptation to focus on some other world than this one, to organize itself around the premise that getting people to heaven is our real purpose and that one way to do that is to persuade people that the world is tainted, sinful, tempting, and that faithful people will simply not be too fond of it or committed to it.

Pray for the city, Jeremiah told the exiles. This world is the agenda. The Word became flesh and lived among us. God enters human history in the life of a man and lives that life thoroughly, experiencing everything it means to be human, its glory and despair, its joys and sadness, its appetites and hopes and fears and loves, and its death. The religion based on God's revelation in Jesus Christ is the worldliest of all religions. It is about God's love for the world and God's hopes for the human family living in this world.

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life."

This church has always understood Jeremiah, that its mission is the city and that its welfare as a church is all wrapped up in the welfare of the city. This church has always understood that the incarnation, the coming of God into the life of the world, is its own mission statement—that the church exists to allow the Word to become flesh over and over again, in Christ-like life lived intentionally in the world.

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Presbyterian Involvement in the World
Calvin
1776
A difficult time for mainline churches

Mainline — PRR/Philadelphia.
Suburbs where decision makers, haste

makers, where the elite lived in the 19th century.

In millions	denomination
1	Congregational (UCC)*
2	Presbyterian*
2	Episcopal (Anglican)*
10	Methodist
1	Disciples/Christian
1	American Baptist
5/6 sometimes	Lutheran — more ethnic

*** colonial Big Three**

40,000,000 — all down 20-30% or more since 1960

MEM - *The Protestant Voice in American Pluralism*

(EXPAND)

- We dominated from pre-colonial (1607) through War for Independence through 19th century and into 20th

-Most Presidents, Senators came from Mainline

-NCC formed after WWII represented

Our leaders were reorganized and cultivated

- Eugene Carson Blake, Stated Clerk in *TIME*

- with Bishop Pike-COCU

- Presbyterians build 475 Riverside Drive

- National Headquarters-President Eisenhower dedicated

-church was growing-suburban explosion

Great cultural upheaval in 60's — everything united seemed to be coming loose — nothing nailed down and secure

- **Vietnam**
- **Social upheaval – campus revolts**
- **Sexual revolution**

Suddenly- going to church was no longer "part of the package."

- **attendance leveled off**
- **membership started to decline**

Demographic changes – Mainliners (Presbyterians) stopped reproducing themselves

Birth rate dropped below 2 – for educated, middle class people – and church membership started to decline

<u>Simultaneously</u>

- Burgeoning forms of religion

-Pentacostalism

- Cities began to change dramatically older urban neighborhoods - with parish churches began to change

-racially – minorities-African Americans-not always welcome or comfortable in Presbyterian Churches

-<u>economically</u>- local industry moved out, suburbs beckoned- leaving behind old church buildings, aging congregations, few families, fewer children and almost no young people

- A portrait of PoC today (undergoing another massive change as people move back –requires nimbleness

Mainline – hangs onto old structures for very good reason- but invests lots in perpetuating old structures

In the meantime 2 huge movements have an impact

- **Megachurch-Non-Denominational**
- **Culture Wars**

Robert Schiller-Garden Grove-Drive-In-new set of priorities-no visible denomination, less emphasis on traditional religious symbols, vocabulary

Willow Creek-Saddleback-examples of a new way of being church – anti-Mainline

No symbols, pews, stained glass, crosses, pews, pulpits, robes, hymnals

Hymns-Songs
Organ-Praise Band/huge sound system, screen
Choir-Praise Team
Sermon-Message
Pew-Stool, theatre seat

Doing well and touching some we aren't touching

<u>Our PCUSA</u>
Early settlers-many Presbyterians-from Scotland, Northern Ireland (Ulster) to PA, VA, NC, NJ

Dominated Middle colonies
Brought fierce independent sentiment and sometimes anti-British

Here in late 1600s-Rehobeth, DE
By early 1700s – a Presbytery/Synod
By 1778-a General Assembly

Colonial partisans
William Pitt-Parliament-that Presbyterian Revolt

<u>Post-Colonial</u>
Western Frontier-not nearly as nimble as Methodists
Issue was educated ministry-not enough-Methodists and Baptists evangelized the frontier

Presbyterians continued, albeit more deliberately
Planting churches-starting schools and colleges (our finest hour) in any state
Working with native population-Navaho, Alaska nations
Still many Presbyterian institutions/70 colleges
At the Civil War- split over slavery
PC in Confederacy
PCUSA
Remained divided into 1983 Reunion
At that time 4.2 million
2.2 million today

Other big movement –a Culture War
Variously described
Conservative-Liberal
Evangelical-Progressive
2 different world views

Clashes in church over hot-button issues: race, gender/women's role, missional emphasis, evangelical or service
Biggest, of course-sex
Human sexuality studies
Reproduction rights-abortion
Homosexuality (all struggling with it)

After not directly addressing it for centuries (in closet)

Human sexuality reports-from worlds of medicine and psychiatry and churches begin to consider the complexity of sexuality and entertained the formerly unthinkable (as unthinkable as racial equality a hundred years ago) i.e. that

homosexuality may not be a deviation but “normal, natural to some

In 1996 conservatives in the PCUSA got a Constitutional Amendment preventing ordination to Deacons and Elders- Ministers- of practicing homosexuals and anyone else engaged in sexual relations outside marriage

We’ve been fighting ever since

Both sides have dug in with organized efforts to defend/change
Bi-annual battles
Some have left
God only knows how many gay/lesbian Presbyterians and families have left

<u>Very Recent</u>

Financial crisis
Less undesignated mission money
Smaller national staff, reductions in programs
We are still a big enterprise

<u>Future</u>

We spend so much energy in self analysis, fretting and hand wringing that we miss a huge global religious transformation.

We spend so much time on newly resurgent and militant Islam that we miss the fact that Christianity is by far the largest religion in the world and the fastest growing.

We miss it because it's going on elsewhere- southern hemisphere (S. America, Africa, Asia).

Phillip Jenkins, Penn State sociologist of religion and *Christian Century* columnist calls it a New Reformation with historic significance and ramifications every bit as profound as the 16th century Reformation.

In South America-mainly Pentecostal-Older paradigm was a dominant and very conservative Catholicism-with a very small Protestant presence-as a result of missionary activity. Most converts were from Roman Catholicism.

So there are three big Presbyterian (Protestant?) denominations in Brazil and a Presbyterian presence in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Colombia. Relatively small but very vigorous.

In Colombia, churches are often on the frontier of human rights and often in trouble.

Visited as Moderator-tried to broker reunion between the Brazilian churches and the seminary in Fortaleza.

In Chile-seminary-met Korean President –Missionary- and new Korean churches in Santiago.

Buenos Aires-request to meet with Pentecostal Seminary-at night-to auto

repair shop, upstairs-room, table, 10 men, shirts and ties.

We need help with theological education- pastors-scattered-need resources-Bible, History, Lawyers, Theologians - many illiterate.

“Your Presbyterians know theological education- help?”

Where is your seminary? Here-this room-cassette tapes weekly-how many? 3,000!

(Cuba story here?)

Jenkins says — a new Christian church is being born and it will look like nothing we’ve ever seen before.

WCC acknowledging-Pentecostal dialogue- not hostile to us, social conscience, progressive-not fundamentalist.

Africa-similar, but there are strong churches as a result of 19th/20th century missionaries.

More Anglicans in Nigeria than England.

More Presbyterians in Kenya than in the US.

Desperate need for resources, leadership

PC East Africa-everywhere-schools, health clinics.

AIDS epidemic-PC of Cameroon-education/treatment-Kumba Clinic.

Also Korea story:

The evangelical power of Christian love at work in the world: I encountered it when I was for a year representing the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). On a visit to Korea, I asked Presbyterian leaders to what they attributed the great success of Christianity, particularly Presbyterianism, in their country. They told me an amazing story. The first Protestant missionaries to Korea arrived in 1885: a Methodist and

a Presbyterian, Horace Underwood. Underwood's wife, Lilias, whom he met and married in Korea, was a physician. When a cholera epidemic struck, the Korean people reacted as people for centuries responded to infectious diseases: by getting away, isolating the victims, and essentially abandoning them to their suffering and death. New Korean Christians stunned their neighbors by visiting and caring for the sick, carrying them to a new hospital they had established. The Korean people called them angels.

When the emperor's wife fell ill, because of Korean custom she was not allowed to be touched and treated by a man. So the emperor sent for Dr. Lilias Underwood. The empress recovered,

and suddenly the climate in Korea changed from suspicion to tolerance, openness, and even interest in these people who seemed to love even the least of these.

The result was public hygiene.

China

Mission field at one time 500 Presbyterian missionaries in China alone-compared to 200 today (total)

Boxer Rebellion and martyrs

Suffered Japanese occupation-house arrest-some executed (AMR)
After WWII back in business-churches scattered throughout China

1947 Communist takeover-missionaries expelled
Pastors jailed, forced to recant
Churches-seminaries closed
No place for religion in the Communist culture, especially Christianity (Western imperialism)

Religious persecution-Syngman Rhee's North Korean family-father led to public square and shot

In 1947 Chinese Church-maybe 1 million went underground-emerged in late 80s with cultural theme-5 million-Bishop Ting-reception at WWC Canberra-unforgettable

Today- a phenomenal story-*Economist* 2008 on Christianity in China

Today 130 million-Zhao Xiao-former communist official

i.e. more Christians than Communist party members and more Christians than any other nation

Official Churches-full-G.W. Bush attended

New phenomena-under radar and without official approval-House Churches-25 members maximum-unclear legal status-so they keep under 25

Parallels with NT church are uncanny-i.e. small gatherings necessary and wide persecution helped grow the faith-when one reaches 25, another is spun off
No salaries, building, “management quality” is a challenge

Nondenominational

After Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989-many disenchanted Chinese

turned to Christianity-six of 30 student leaders are now Christian

“In much of Christianity’s heartland, Europe, North America, it is associated with tradition and ritual. In China-modernity, business, science.”

There is Beijing House Church Alliance-President expelled during the Olympics.

Got in trouble for sending $ to earthquake Sichuan (omen-don’t need charity!)

Political leaders now consulting with religious leaders

No turning back-something new and exciting

So what about us? Will we be in the future?

Yes-but in a different role.

We have been disestablished-no longer run the show.

We have demographic and political issues

Our denominations will be different-changing in front of our eyes-mid 20th century model is dying-centralized, corporate.

My sense-is that we will live in churches like this one-insofar as we remember why we are here:

Not to dominate, influence-"succeed" but to serve

MEM, p. 78-80 *The Protestant Voice in American Pluralism*:

(p. 78-9)"Rather than have imperial ambitions, to be moved by nostalgia or resentment, it seems best in the meantime to draw on motifs of

Protestantism, elements of community, scripture, tradition, memory, affection, and hope, that can see to the survival and invigoration of the Protestant subcommunities in their tattered tents, where the flaps flap in every breeze."

(p. 79-80) "They can address the basic public issues: saving the environment; sustaining development; addressing the growing gap between the overfed and the ill-fed, the rich and the poor; assuring rights; finding better ways than warfare for resolving conflicts. Their God-don't all Protestants believe this?- is the Lord of history, the God not held captive in the sanctuaries, but who in mysterious ways leads his people to address the world that unfolds before them, a

world their ancestors helped shape, a world their ancestors managed, controlled, and directed, as their children cannot so readily do. And if my historical accounting has some merit, it is a world in which Protestants should not aspire to run the show but to serve where they managed, to partner where they controlled, to cooperate where they directed.

If Pastor Robinson was right, that "the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from his holy word," there should be some fresh things to say, to do, and to hear."

(end of MEM reference, pp. 78-80)

Pastor John Robinson-who bade farewell to the Mayflower Company as it headed west across the Atlantic-“the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from his holy word.”